Hulie and Chase were seven years old ...

Ralla leaned over the rampart, jerking at the collar of his tunic in an attempt to fan his overheated body. The sun beat down from the center of a cornflower blue sky, and the air was filled with a haze of dust and pollen that aggravated the guard's sinuses. He sneezed, inspected the results on the palm of his hand, and then absently wiped it on his pant leg. He had shaved his head this morning in anticipation of the scorching midday, but if it had any affect, Ralla didn't notice. Sweat poured down his face in buckets, stung his eyes so he had to squint as he gazed out across the plains.

The great plains were packed with gift-wielding travelers. Ralla didn't think he'd ever seen so many people in one place in his entire life, thought he could walk across their shoulders all the way to the Potagana without ever touching the ground. From high up on the wall they looked to him like an ant colony filing back to their hill, except the people he watched lacked the discipline and order of insects. A caravan had collided with a train of elephants, spilling a cargo of wine (which attracted a growing crowd of revelers) and a chest of ivory (which upset the elephants more than they already were). Ralla identified city guards already on the scene by the crimson flash of their insignia, trying to disperse the drunks while calming the pachyderms. Further away, what looked like a parade of cheetahs, ostriches, and camels was being led by a family of deformed dwarves.

Probably don't even have a permit for those things, Ralla thought spitefully. Then he wondered if you actually *needed* a permit for cheetahs or camels. Probably not.

He palmed sweat from his brow and sighed. He didn't know where he'd rather be, out in the fields amidst all that chaos, where he might at least be able to bring a lick of sanity, or up here at his sentry post, useless and frying under the merciless sun. He took a sip from his water skin, swished it around in his mouth, allowing it time to unglue all the caked and crusted saliva that had accumulated, and spat it back out.

Ralla picked out a spot of color in the gathered crowds. It was an aged shaman dressed in the tattered hides of countless species, clad in jewelery of teeth and talon and feather that was supposed to serve as totems of deep-rooted ancestry, but only impressed a weird and savage attitude on the tired city guard. Ralla followed him as the shaman slowly crossed the savannah, weaving between bunches of traders and merchants; an extended family that must have numbered in the hundreds and comprised an entire village; a group of young hunters hoisting a gold statue of a lion on a wooden pallet. His bald head glistening with perspiration, the old shaman walked with a slight hunch, a stagger in his step that bordered on a limp.

"Hey, Vanay, come and check this out."

Vanay, another guard, stepped up next to Ralla as he pointed the colorful shaman out.

"What, the old man?"

"Yeah," Ralla said.

"What about him?"

"What do you suppose he's got hidden under that cage of his?"

As he drew closer to the gate, Ralla had observed that the shaman carried some sort of cage or basket. It was difficult to say exactly what he held, because he had draped a cloth over the bundle.

"Another gift for the princes, I suppose," Vanay shrugged.

Ah, yes, another gift for the spoiled princes. Tomorrow was the twin princes' birthday, and citizens from all across the empire were descending on the capital to shower the boys with presents. Ralla couldn't understand the logic to the whole thing. Chieftains had scrounged the meager resources of their fishing and hunting villages to offer as paltry gifts at the feet of the two people who needed it less than any other soul on the entire planet. What was the point? Why not grant the gifts to someone more needing and grateful...like Ralla, for example.

"Lets go see what he's got in there," Ralla said.

Vanay protested with a mumble under his breath, but followed Ralla down the granite steps to the raised portcullis of the sidegate. They crossed their arms and leaned against the wall, trying to look tough for all the visitors filtering through the gate, half of which had probably never been to the city before. It was cooler here--in the shadow of the arch--than up on the rampart, and Ralla tried to take advantage while he waited for the shaman to approach. He removed his helmet, tucking it under his arm, and loosened the straps of his

cuirass and pauldrons.

"Millions of people coming to the city this week," Vannay said, scraping dirt from under his fingernails with a knife, "and you need to pick on one old man."

"I don't want to pick on him. I just want to see what he's got. I'm curious...and bored."

It took almost an hour for the shaman to reach the funnel of the gate. No longer secluded up on the wall, Ralla's duties were relegated to providing directions and handing out water to the dehydrated tourists that passed. Finally, he spotted the shiny scalp of the old man as it bobbed through the crowd.

"Excuse me," Ralla said, and pulled the shaman to the side. He tried to be as respectful as he could, and was gentle in his maneuvring. Not because of the man's considerable age--but because Ralla was citybred, and didn't have much experience with the wild tribesman that lived out on the frontiers. He had heard stories, and didn't need some witch doctor or sorcerer turning him into a malaria-spreading mosquito.

"Can I help you?" the shaman said.

"Yes..." A breeze picked up, the first stirring of the wind all day. But instead of bringing relief, all it delivered was the stinging slap of heat mingled with dust. Ralla sneezed twice in rapid secession. "...Yes. I was wondering what you had in the..."

Ralla received another slap in the face. He realized the shaman suffered from complete heterochromia--one eye's iris was blue, the

other orange grained with black.

"You were wondering what I had in the basket?" the shaman offered helpfully.

Ralla managed to tear away from the strange pair of eyes that demanded his attention. "Yes, exactly," he said, looking down at his feet.

"It is a gift for the Prince Hulie."

"Ah, yes, I assumed that much. I was wondering, more specifically, that is...what...exactly, is the gift?"

"It's a surprise."

"It certainly will be for the prince," agreed Ralla. "I assure you I am not in direct contact with his highness, have never had the pleasure, and even if I were, I would not dare spoil the surprise. And as I am not the receiver of the gift, surely it need not be a surprise to me."

The shaman paused, weighing the truth of Ralla's words. Ralla was glad at least one of them was, as it seemed to him he'd spoken pure gibberish.

"Okay," the shaman said, and pulled back the hemp-cloth cover to reveal the most unremarkable white cat Ralla had ever seen.

"Oh," Ralla said. He swallowed a lump in his throat. He didn't know what he'd expected.

The cat meowed at him.

"You sure you don't have something else hidden in there?" he asked, only half-joking.

The shaman assured him he did not have anything stashed beneath the cat, and that he was welcomed to check for himself. Ralla declined.

"Move along," he said. "Enjoy the festivities."

"I'm sure I will."

The shaman wandered off, disappearing in the chaos of Balmaria. Vanay stepped forward.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"No," Ralla said, and sneezed again. "I'm very disappointed."

"What were you hoping for?"

"I dunno. Something exotic. Not a damn white tomcat. What the hell kind of gift is that for the heir of an empire?"

"A very poor one."

The shaman strolled down the densely packed streets of the capital city, the bundle cradled protectively against his chest. The main avenues of Balmaria were famously broad, wide enough to

accomodate parades of

"It doesn't make sense," Hulie said. "Why have they all come bearing gifts for us? I don't want for anything. If anything *we* should be giving *them* gifts."

They were lounging in one of the countless rooms of the royal palace, sipping iced tea and gnawing on a plate of melon. Hulie didn't know what this particular room was called (they each had unique names), just that it was furnished with low divans and had a color scheme of bright red trimmed with gold that upset his stomach. The ceiling was sculptured in a Rococo fashion that struck the young prince as gaudy.

His father, the King of Balmaria, said from his seat on the opposing sofa: "It's ritual. They've lifted our line above that of mortal men, making us into some sort of demigods."

"Sacrilege!"

"No, not really. Throughout the generations our blood has mingled more than once with that of immortals, and while we are neither demigods nor immortals ourselves, the people mean no harm in it. They need something in their fellow man to idolize, and if not their leaders, than who?"

"I don't know...sounds like blasphemy to me."

"Only if we claim it as truth. Death is the great equalizer. The people know in their hearts that one day I'll dance with death the

same as the lowest pauper. They know we are not Gods, and we must never purport to be such."

"I still don't understand why they need to give us half of their harvest, or half their annual fishing haul. We already tax them."

"It would be an insult to refuse," the king responded. "You must accept every gift bestowed today with humility, regardless how extravagant or pitiful. Besides, if it's the food you're worried about, all we receive will go back into the public granaries and stocks for the peoples' consumption at a later, more desperate time. The year has been kind to us, and there are extra stores for all. Let them spend excessively for one week."

"I suppose," Hulie conceded.

"Are you excited about the party tonight?"

"A little. It'll be nice to see uncle and my cousins again. In all honesty, I'm more excited about the hunt tomorrow."

It was customary for the prince (or, in this case, princes) to partake in a month long hunt in the Kurtan Basin immediately following his seventh birthday. Not only would Hulie be joined by his father, but he would be accompanied by his twin brother, his uncle and male cousins--of which he'd not seen in years--a bevy of earls, chieftains, warrior-lords and death knights.

The king chuckled. "You take after your old man in that way! And your brother? How does Chase feel about the celebration?"

"He feels the same way I do."

"Of course he does. I don't know why I even bother to ask."

"Where is he, anyway?"

"Probably getting ready for the party, which is what *you* should be doing."

Hulie cast a glance about himself. "I *am* ready."

"No, you're not. There are some ceremonial accoutrements you must don, some ancestral sigils and the family shield which must be painted on your body. The entire process can take upwards of three hours."

Hulie screwed his eyes up at his father. "Huh?"

"You have to stand perfectly still for around three hours while strange women put weird clothes and ridiculous headresses on you and draw cold paintbrushes across your naked body."

"That's awful!" Hulie stuck his tongue out.

"Your brother couldn't wait for it," the king sighed. "It's all he's been asking me about for the past two weeks."

"He's sick in the head."

"Well then, you'll be sick in the head too, one day. It happens to all of us. At least us fathers pray it does."

"Not me."

"Yes, you too. Now go and get ready. Your aunt and uncle will be

here soon."

Hulie wanted to say more--wanted to ask when exactly his uncle would be arriving, as he'd learned that the word 'soon' was subjective and could mean many things to many different adults. He wanted to know why he had to be dressed up in costumes and painted by strangers, or why it was that his twin brother seemed to enjoy it. But Hulie was an intelligent child, and as much as he perceived, he understood most that his father would try to answer all of his questions in simple yet honest terms, and that it was unlikely he would comprehend any of the explanations. So he remained silent, content in his own adolescent perplexity, and kissed his father on a grizzled cheek before parting the red and gold room for a hallway of mirrors (again, this hallway must have had a unique name that the valets could recite, but which Hulie didn't have a clue). As he strolled down the corridor, he studied his reflection in the silver-backed glass that lined the walls, trying to convey a sense of nobility to himself, as he'd seen his father do naturally in stride. While distracted, he tripped over his own pair of feet. Lately, it seemed Hulie had been growing at approximately two inches per night--a sort of prepubescent growth spurt--and each morning he awoke to find his legs extended and completely unwieldy. He was the tallest person of his age, besides his friend Stushoe, who was considered either a freak or a marvel depending on who you asked. Now, in the hall of mirrors (or whatever fancy name it was really called), feet twisting together like a baker's pretzel, Hulie watched himself in the closest mirror as his lips slackened, his arms pinwheeled, and his body performed a ninety-degree rotation, one moment standing vertical, and the next sprawled flat along the rug.

A trail of saliva dripped out of his mouth, and watching himself in a mirror that was--to his personal and royal (and therefore infallible) opinion--placed wrongly at that angle of the floor, he felt a blush of shame that reddened his face. Hulie swiftly lept to his feet, corrected his collar in the same said mirror, and noticed standing only feet away to his left a solitary and remarkably life-like statue. He scrutinized the sculpture, wondering at the artist that had painted it. It rested on no plinth, and although its visage was very familiar, he couldn't recall ever seeing it before. It was so realistic he half-expected it to breathe. Hulie coughed into his sleeve, perturbed at the audacity of such a statue, but unable to raise his ire against it.

As Hulie passed, the statue swiveled and followed his progress. Hulie froze, bracing his legs in preparation for the assassin's blade. awaiting the kiss of an assassin's blade into his spine, and when it did not come, he focused his attention on the extravagant display.

"Hello, Jat," Hulie said, and exhaled with relief.

"Hello, young master," Jatrabi replied. He stepped off of his imaginary plinth and kept pace with the boy. "Off to get ready for your big night?"

"Apparently. I'm still not sure what's expected of me."

"You're too young to remember the last time they had you all dolled up. You'll get used to it, eventually."

"They've done this to me before?" Hulie asked, shocked by his own terrible memory.

"I think you were four the last time."

"What were we celebrating then? My birthday?"

"No, no. Nothing special about a boy's *fourth* birthday. It's not like the seventh or fourteenth. No, I believe you had made your first kill."

Hulie couldn't recall his first kill with much clarity, only brief images--a spear clutched in tiny fists, shaft bending under the weight of the prey impaled on its point. On a leaf, a splash of bright color that may have been blood. Mud churned in a frenzy of moccasins and hooves. The most vivid memory was that of the smell--a heady mix of iron and sweat. Hulie wrinkled his nose at the thought.

"I remember a feast," he said.

"Of course you do! You slayed the main course!"

They exited the hall of mirrors, and Jatrabi led Hulie through a confusing salarium with doors branching off at every angle. A fossil and crystal chandelier dangled from the ceiling.

"Are you going to help me get ready?" Hulie asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not, young sire. Only the women are allowed. But Jasmina will be there for you."

Hulie exhaled relief. Jasmina was a matronly countess that served at the palace, not out of any lawful responsibility, but because Hulie's own mother was deceased and Jasmina felt it necessary for the young prince to have a strong female in his life. Hulie was

related to her in some distant way that he was not sure of. His father's third cousin or something.

"I don't want her to see me naked," Hulie said.

"She changed your diapers for two years, sire," Jatrabi replied.

"Gross."

"Fret not on it. It's one thing a king never has to worry his mind with."

They were in another hallway, this one lined with portraits of Hulie's ancestors, all receding hairlines and aquiline noses. They all looked noble and frightening to the young prince. Then again, paintings of his father were intimidating, but he knew the real man to be warm and loving. He wondered what impressions his own paintings would one day hold.

"What was my first kill, Jatrabi? A boar?"

"Yes, it was a boar."

"Is that...normal?"

Jatrabi froze. He turned slowly to face Hulie, swinging on his heels. He grabbed the prince's shoulders softly and looked him in the eye.

"There is nothing normal about you, my prince," he said, voice taut. "I don't mean this to frighten you, and it's probably not my place. But you are heir to the most powerful empire on the planet. You can topple regimes, bring peace to millions, or wreak

devastation and heartbreak. Tonight is not a normal affair. Millions have descended on the greatest city in the world to celebrate one thing--well, two actually. The birth of you and your brother."

"No," Hulie said, stepping back to break out of Jatrabri's hold. "I didn't mean if *I* was normal. I know all that. I mean, is killing a boar at four normal?"

"Oh, that," Jatrabi said, chagrined. "No, that's not normal either. The sow you brought down was four hundred pounds and six feet long. I have seen few like it. You weighed maybe forty pounds at the time and were two feet high. No, that isn't normal either."

"Oh."

the guards on the western watch noticed the old man from a mile away. A ragged shaman dressed in bizarre tattered hides of countless species, clad in jewelery of teeth and talon and feather that served as totems of deep rooted emotion, he slowly crossed the savannah with a dignity acquired only through countless years. His bald head glistening with sweat, he walked with a slight hunch, a stagger in his step that bordered on a limp.

When he reached the City of Balmaria's great gates the guards approached him promptly. It was a tense day for the militia. Security was tight in light of Balmaria's "twin" princes' seventh birthday. In Balmaria, a young boy's seventh birthday is a major holiday for their families. Seven is the age in which Balmarian's believe that a young boy is allowed to go on the hunt with their fathers and uncles. Generally, the day before their sons' birthdays, the sons and their elders go on a hunt and when they return, the women are awaiting them where they will cook the prize meat and serve it at the festival. Now, when a prince reaches the age of seven

the whole city pays tribute in celebration of their lord.

One guard noticed the old shaman suffered from complete heterochromia--one eye's iris was blue, the other orange grained with emerald. In one hand he carried a gnarled walking stick, in the other he held a large cast iron cage draped in a purple velvet cloth.

"You there, shaman. From what tribe do you hail?" the commanding officer asked.

The old man dipped his head in a slight bow, his shit eating grin remaining unchanged, eerily symmetrical. His eyes focussed held the guard's in their off-color gaze, even as he bowed.

"Good sir, I hail from no tribe. I am a man of the plains," the shaman said. His voice was cheerful, yet dry.

The guard captain's gaze was fixed on those blue and orange eyes. Clearly something didn't feel right about this old man, but that gaze made the guard feel strangely humble in his presence.

"If you don't hold allegiance to a tribal lord, then what is your business here?" the guard finally replied.

Notes to Dan: I'm sure you've already guessed, but the shaman is

one of D'yoga's (the lion god) human deities. The Balmarian's are familiar with the man from folk-lore. He is like a Johhny Appleseed kind of character to them, "The man who lives with lions" or something to that effect. They see him more as servant of D'yoga than actually being him, and he plays towards their ignorance. It is likely the royals would know better though. But, since he is sort of a mythical character, most Balmarian's don't actually believe he exists.

This can be changed, but since you mentioned Hulie riding a white lion, I figured this would be a good oppurtunity to introduce that. I figure the old man is carrying a white lion cub in the cage he is carrying. I don't know what gift Chase will recieve, if any. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

I'm okay with the old man carrying a white lion, that's cool with me. But no, I didn't guess it, or that the shaman was Dyoga. I did wonder why, out of the thousands or even millions of pilgrims flocking to the capital, the guards would select him out of the crowd. What about him is suspicious? Your descriptions of him don't seem--at least to me--suspicious. He seems like an old and respectable shaman. Why do the guards come after him?

It is just the aura radiating off of him. The guards don't understand

what it is they are feeling. Something seems strange to them, only natural that they would investigate. But, they aren't about to cut him down or anything.

It was the princes' seventh birthday. In Balmarian culture, the seventh was a marked occassion, as it was considered the midway point to manhood, as well as the first time a boy was allowed to participate in a hunt. It was all just ceremonial, though, as most children were allowed to go hunting with their fathers whenever the father decided, and most didn't wait seven years.